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Message Text

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PAGE 01 BEIRUT 00377 291444Z
ACTION NODS-00

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FOR THE SECRETARY FROM CHARGE'

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, IS, LE, US
SUBJECT: ASF DEPLOYMENT IN SOUTHERN LEBANON

REF: (A) STATE 019280, (B) BEIRUT 0369

1. FUAD BUTROS, GOL MIN OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE CALLED ME IN AT 11:15 LOCAL TIME JAN 29. HE SAID PRESIDENT SARKIS HAD DISCUSSED WITH HIM PROBLEM OF ASF MOVEMENT IN SOUTH LEBANON AND ASKED THAT HE DISCUSS MATTER AGAIN WITH ME. BUTROS THEN REVIEWED EXPLANATIONS PREVIOUSLY GIVEN ME BY SARKIS AND ASF COMMANDER AL HAJJ FOR THIS MOVEMENT - IT WAS DONE FOR PURELY INTERNAL SECURITY REASONS TO PROVIDE PROTECTION FOR THE CHRISTIAN-SHIITE VILLAGES IN THE AREA THAT WERE BEING MOLESTED BY THE PALESTINIANS; NO MORE THAN 450 TROOPS WERE INVOLVED ALONG THE WHOLE LINE FROM KFAR HUNE TO KFAR TIBNIT; AND THE MOVE ITSELF WAS MORE SYMBOLIC THAN MILITARY. THE SMALL NUMBER OF TROOPS, THEIR LIGHT ARMAMENT AND THE POSITIONS THEY OCCUPIED ALL PROVED THAT THEY WERE NO THREAT TO ISRAEL. SINCE THE INITIAL MOVEMENT WAS COMPLETED ON JAN 25, THERE HAD BEEN ABSOLUTELY NO REINFORCEMENT. IF ISRAEL WAS COMPLAINING, BUTROS SAID, IT WAS ONLY BECAUSE THEY WERE SEEKING A PRETEXT TO MAKE TROUBLE AND PERHAPS OCCUPY PART OF LEBANON. HE SAID THAT USG HAD NOT

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BEEN CONSULTED BECUASE LEBANESE HAD ASSUMED THAT THE "RED LINE" WAS THE LITANI RIVER AND THAT ASF WAS FREE TO OPERATE NORTH AND WEST OF THAT LINE.

2. BUTROS THEN ADDED SOMETHING NEW. HE SAID THAT IN FACT THEREK WERE NO ASF FORCES IN NABATIYA. ASF AND GOL HAD NOT PUBLICIZED THIS FACT BECAUSE THEY WANTED PEOPLE TO THINK THEY WERE ALREADY

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THERE OR WERE COMING, BUT BUTROS REPEATED THAT THEY WERE PRESENTLY NO ASF FORCES IN THE TOWN AND NO PLANS FOR THEM TO MOVE IN.

3. I REFERRED TO ISRAELI REQUEST FOR A DATE AND TIMETABLE BY WHICH ASF UNITS WOULD BE WITHDRAWN. BUTROS REPLIED THAT IT WOULD BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO DO THIS. IF ASF WERE TO WITH-DRAW, PALESTINIANS AND OTHER LAWLESS ELEMENTS WOULD RETURN EVEN MORE STRONGLY THAN BEFORE, AND THE CHRISTIANS IN THE AREA WOULD BE SLAUGHTERED. IN ADDITION, THE PRESTIGE OF PRESIDENT SARKIS AND HIS GOVERNMENT WOULD BE SEVERELY WEAKENED. FURTHER-MORE, THERE WAS A QUESTION WHETHER THE SYRIANS WOULD AGREE TO WITHDRAW, SINCE SUCH AN ACTION WOULD SERIOUSLY DAMAGE THEIR PRESTIGE AND STRENGTHEN THEIR ENEMIES IN LEBANON. I ASKED IF LEBANESE ARMY COULD NOT ASSUME THE ASF ROLE. BUTROS REPLIED THAT LEBANESE ARMY WAS STILL SO SPLIT THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO USE IT IN THE SOUTH. (COMMENT: DATT HAS HEARD THAT CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS OF LEBANESE ARMY HAVE REFUSED TO SERVE IN THE SOUTH.) ON THE OTHER HAND, BUTROS SAID, WITHDRAWL OF ASF IS NOT VITAL TO ISRAELI SECURITY. I REPLIED THAT ISRAELI GOVERNMENT HAD REAL PROBLEMS WITH THIS UNEXPECTED ASF MOVE. WHAT COULD GOI SAY TO ISRAELI CITIZEN WHO ASKED WHAT ARE YOU DOING ABOUT ADVANCE OF ENEMY SYRIAN TROOPS TOWARD OUR BORDER? BUTROS SAID GOI COULD RESPOND THAT ASF MOVEMENT WAS EXTREMELY LIMITED IN NUMBER, THAT PURPOSE WAS ENTIRELY TO ESTABLISH INTERNAL SECURITY IN LEBANON INCLUDING CONTROL OF PALESTINIANS THAT THERE HAD BEEN NO ADVANCE OR REINFORCEMENT OF ASF FORCES SINCE INITIAL MOVEMENT, AND GOI HAD WARNED THAT THERE MUST BE NONE. BUTROS THOUGHT THIS EXPLANATION SHOULD SATISFY GOI AND ISRAELI PUBLIC OPINION. HE ASKED THAT I SEND HIS VIEWS IMMEDIATELY TO DEPT AND REQUEST THAT

USG INTERVENE WITH ISRAELIS TO PERSUADE THEM TO ACCEPT THIS EXPLANATION.HE SAID THAT THE LEBANESE CABINET MEETS MONDAY AFTER-NOON BUT HE WOULD PREFER NOT TO HAVE THIS QUESTION RAISED IN THAT FORUM. HE SAID HE WOULD RECEIVE ME IMMEDIATELY AS SOON AS I HAD A RESPONSE FROM MY GOVERNMENT.

4. I THEN REFERRED TO OUR NEED TO BE CONSULTED BEFORE THERE ARE ANY FUTURE DEPLOYMENTS OF ASF TOWARDS THE SOUTH AT ANY POINT. BUTROS SAID THIS WOULD BE DONE AND ADDED "VERY INFORMALLY" THAT WE SHOULD ALSO MAKE SURE TO GET THIS MESSAGE TO THE SYRIANS. HE SAID THE SYRIANS USUALLY INFORM THE GOL OF WHAT THEY ARE PLANNING TO DO,BUT NOT ALWAYS. IN CLOSING, BUTROS AGAIN EXPRESSED CONCERN OVER WHAT HE CONSIDERS DELIBERATE OVER-REACTION BY ISRAEL AND EXPRESSED HOPE THAT USG WOULD USE ITS INFLUENCE TO PREVENT ISRAELIS FROM RAISING TENSIONS IN THE AREA AT A TIME WHEN SECGEN WALDHUM AND SECRETARY VANCE WOULD SOON BE VISITING.

5. COMMENT: SARKIS AND BUTROS ARE CLEARLY WORRIED BY ISRAELI THREATS. AT SAME TIME, DEVELOPING A TIMETABLE FOR WITHDRAWL OF

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ASF FORCES WITHIN THE TIME FRAME THE ISRALIS WANT PRESENTS THEM WITH ENORMOUS POLITICAL AND SECURITY PROBLEMS. A PRECIPITOUS WITHDRAWL FROM THE KFAR HUNI - KFAR TIBNIT AXIS WILL BE REGARDED BY ALL LEBANESE AS A COWARDLY BACKING DOWN BY SARKIS IN THE FACE OF "ENEMY" THREATS AND WOULD COST HIM HEAVILY IN TERMS OF PRESTIGE AND POLITICAL POWER. FROM THE SECURITY POINT OF VIEW, THERE IS NO REASON TO DOUBT BUTROS'S CLAIM THAT THE CHRISTIAN INHABITANTS IN THIS AREA WILL SUFFER DEARLY IF THE ASF IS HASTILY WITHDRAWN BECAUSE OF ISRAELI THREAT. I HOPE USG CAN BE HELPFUL TO SARKIS IN PRESUADING GOI TO SOFTEN ITS "REQUEST", PERHAPS USING AMBASSADOR MURPHY'S SUGGESTIONS RE DEFINITION OF "RED LINE" IN DAMASCUS 605. OVER PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, USG HAS REPEATED ASSERTED ITS SUPPORT FOR TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AND NATIONAL UNITY OF LEBANON AND "PRESIDENT SARKIS' ESTABLISHMENT OF HIS AUTHORITY THROUGHOUT LEBANON." A HUMILIATING WITHDRAWL IN RESPONSE TO ISRAELI THREATS WILL HAVE EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE EFFECT.

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6. SUGGEST DEPT PASS DAMASCUS AND TEL AVIV.
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Message Attributes

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